

THE
LAMP



OF
HEAVEN

Mrs. L.
Worthington
Smith

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THE LAMP OF HEAVEN

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By Mrs. L. Worthington Smith

THE LAMP OF HEAVEN

A CHINESE PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY

MRS. L. WORTHINGTON SMITH



BOSTON

THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY

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PERSONS OF THE PLAY

MEE FAH KAM, *a maid with bandaged feet.*

HO GIT, *her father.*

SOO KI LOO, *her maid.*

AN AMERICAN OFFICER, *billeted across the street.*

FIRST GERMAN SOLDIER.

SECOND GERMAN SOLDIER.

PETER, *a carrier pigeon.*

TIME

Boxer Rebellion, Summer of 1901

PLACE

Ho Git's Palace in Peking.

ORIGINAL CAST

MEE FAH KAM	<i>Catherine Conrad</i>
SOO KI LOO	<i>Josephine Hunter Ray</i>
HO GIT	<i>Detliv Tillisch</i>
FIRST GERMAN SOLDIER	<i>Capt. Thomas Watters</i>
SECOND GERMAN SOLDIER	<i>Sergt. Victor Schultz</i>
AMERICAN OFFICER	<i>Lieut. Harvey Ray</i>

THE LAMP OF HEAVEN

THE LAMP OF HEAVEN

It is midsummer in Peking, in the year 1901, at the time of the Boxer Rebellion.

The room shown is an intimate chamber in the palace of Ho GIT. The scant furniture, all teak wood and ebony, is of Chinese design. On the wall in front of a rich panel of embroideries inset with irregular pieces of looking-glass, an incense burner sways in the breeze. Two pale lemon-colored lanterns that shade through greens and brilliant Chinese blues, swing from the ceiling, their silk tassle and jade strung cords jangling in the wind. The family shrine, with its jar of incense burning before it, is open. Through the wide window at the back of the room the boughs of a cherry tree in full bloom wave and toss like billows of pink foam. An impotent, lazy luxury permeates the scene, and the langorous manners of Ho GIT are ringing echoes of his high self-esteem and physical content. His long robe of gay damask shows only a hint of trousers above his long, white socks. His coat is richly ornamented with jewelled buttons and metal threads. His left hand carries long gilded nails on his third and fourth fingers, his right sways a small, dark fan.

MEE FAH KAM's garments are of a soft-blue satin. A narrow silver galloon binds the edges of her coat and trousers. Her jacket is richly embroidered with humming-birds, and a bright ornament at her neck matches their ruby throats. Her hair is bound closely about her head and looped fancifully over her right ear where it is held in place with large, carved jade pins. Her slippers are of cream brocaded satin.

At the rise of the curtain, MEE FAH KAM is leaning far out of the window to watch some passer-by in the street below. That someone catches her eye and sends her blushing face back behind the draperies, where she stands, looking out through the maze of cherry blossoms to the snow-capped mountains in the purple distance.

MEE FAH KAM

[Strumming her *omerti* which hangs from its ribbons over her wrist]

The world is just over there and I, I am here.

[She turns quickly at the sound of approaching footsteps and strikes her *omerti* a discordant blow. The door flies open and Soo KI Loo, a little maid, tumbles into the room and salaams deeply, trying to touch her forehead with her right hand and, at the same time, keep the cage from falling out of her kimona sleeve as she salutes her beloved mistress.]

Soo KI LOO

[*Pulling from her sleeve a small willow cage that holds a white homing pigeon*]

American man, him send you dove. Over the compound wall him hand for you. Say "soldiers pillage, if trouble Mee Fa Kam, release—and help from heaven—come soon."

MEE FAH KAM

[*Excitedly, reaching her long fingers through the bars to caress the neck of the carrier pigeon*]

American man? What name?

Soo KI LOO

[*Solemnly*]

Officer. Since war him live in Ling Chang house—outside.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Drawing Soo KI LOO to the window, and pointing beyond the wall*]

Over there?

Soo KI LOO

[*Pointing*]

One—two—three. The lattice where the birdhouse hang above,—that he.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Wishing to be alone*]

Quick, rice and hemp seeds—and crickets. [*As maid protests.*] Grasshoppers, then. Go.

[When the maid is gone, MEE FAH KAM opens the cage, takes the dove out and holds it caressingly against her cheek and neck. She laughs as its pink toes curl about her fingers, and lifts it high over her head. Swaying it back and forth playfully, she snatches it to her mouth and kisses its polished bill, crooning happily, in a haltingly sing-song voice.]

“Life comes like a bird song

Through the open windows of the heart.”

[Hearing steps in the corridor she places the dove back in the cage, and leaning far out, sets the basket on the wide casement at the side of the window where her father will not see. As her father enters she flutters down from her perch at the window, spreads her arms and touches her head to the floor with wilful obedience.]

Honorable father! [She reaches the tea-tray and pours a cup and slides it across the floor until it touches her father's hand.] Honorable father!

HO GIT

[Sipping the tea slowly, and punctuating his words with deep draughts]

My little Jonquil nods her head in the—sun—and—sighs . . . Why does she—sigh?

MEE FAH KAM

[Impatiently]

But the jasmine flowers are sweetest outside the garden, honorable father, and your pretty little Mee

Fah Kam must sit and drink their fragrance with her nostrils. Could I but walk and I would pluck their august blooms and make a pillow for my feet to step upon.

HO GIT

[*Striking the gong at his side*]

Soo Ki Loo will bring you jasmine and cherry flowers and purple moon-kissed hyacinths. [*Turning as the maid enters.*] Soo Ki Loo, flowers for the daughter of Ho Git.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Waving away the suggestion*]

Soo Ki Loo plucks them and they smell of her fingers. I want them not, so. I would snap their stems with my own hands, most excellent father, I would feel the west wind kissing my hair.

HO GIT

[*Lifting his eyes toward Soo Ki Loo*]

Her peacock fan shall woo soft breezes to you to kiss your painted cheek, and waters, tinkling in your fountain softly, will tell of autumn clouds that hovered low. [*Soo Ki Loo goes behind her mistress and languidly swings the long-handled feather fan over her head.*]

The world comes to the feet of the august daughter of the honorable Ho Git when she but speaks. She does not walk. Her most excellent foot is too small.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Sadly defiant*]

Her foot aches with pinching, and her heart flutters to be free.

HO GIT

[*Lifting his brows lightly*]

My daughter's heart flutters from foot pinching. The ache extends so far. [*He slides his cup along the floor for more tea.*] My little Mee Fah Kam eats none too lightly of birds' nest puddings and airy nothings spun of sugar and nut-meats. The foreign doctor gives a pellet for indigestion, and heart-aches vanish in the crystal air. [*Clapping his hands and calling to the servant.*] Soo Ki Loo, bring the great doctor. Your mistress has eaten sweet-meats and her palpitant heart is fluttering.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Rising from the floor and struggling to balance herself.*]

My august heart flutters not from sweet-meats, honorable father. I tremble to see the gold-fish splashing in the ponds outside the wall; to hear the lisp of rice-husks kissing the threshing floor; to feel the heaven-born mists kissing my brow. [*Slowly but with growing excitement.*] Mee Fah Kam would feel the dew-wet grass bending beneath her feet. She would stand, walk—[*beating her breast with her clinched hands*] She would run alone. [*In her eagerness she has*

reached too far out and is about to fall when her father rises to catch her.]

HO GIT

[Unmoved]

I will close the ears of our worthy ancestors while my daughter speaks foolishly. *[He places MEE FAH KAM with her back to the altar, closes the doors of the shrine, and, with elaborate ceremony, pours fresh rice in the bowls that flank the jar of burning oil.]*

It is the big-footed daughter of the foreign doctor that starts the dreams? The streets are filled with hideous she-monsters whose heavy feet press down our sacred ways. Ho Git's daughter does not walk. There is no need. *[Pompously waving his hand and lifting one eye-brow]* Ho Git commands and the whole world passes beneath his window.

MEE FAH KAM

[Sinking to her knees in terror as the sound of a shuffling mob comes in from the street, and the light patter of a woman's feet is followed by a piercing scream]

Worthy father, do the soldiers come within our compound?

[A spent bullet crashing through the cherry blooms sends a shower of snowy petals over the carpet where MEE FAH KAM crouches in an agony of fear]

[15]

HO GIT

[*Loftily unmoved*]

I have not asked the pigs to eat of our rice or drink our ambrosial tea.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Struggling to her feet as a door crashes in the hall below and the thud of marching feet comes nearer and nearer*]

It is said that the soldiers of the heaven appointed kaiser wait not for invitations, honorable father. Soo Ki Loo, coming from the market, saw the wells outside the garden half filled with tender little maids, my Sheima with the rest.

HO GIT

[*Impatiently*]

A soft maid's tale. Heed it not. The humble servants should be careful how they fall in. They have heels. Let them run.

MEE FAH KAM

[*In a hushed, frightened voice*]

But your little Mee Fah Kam cannot run, respectful father. I am a pale will o' the wisp floating above the world. Over the marshes and up the mountain side I beckon, and you come—if you will. I am a purple orchid swaying 'twixt heaven and earth, drawing my sustenance from the parent stem. I asked for nothing and life was given me. I begged to live, and it is only that I do not die.

HO GIT

[Frightened, but unwilling to comprehend, stands with his back to the door as the sound of breaking glass and curses and muffled moans shivers through the room]

They cannot enter. The guards of the great Ho Git surround the door.

[The door swings back and two German soldiers step inside and bind HO GIT's arms and legs.]

FIRST SOLDIER

[Imitating HO GIT's slow, flowery speech with tipsy, guttural accent]

The guards of the great Ho Git are sleeping soundly. They were very tired. Let them sleep. They have been sniping at our soldiers many days. Peace be unto them. We bring them peace.

SECOND SOLDIER

[Laughing drunkenly and looking amorously across at MEE FAH KAM, who hides her face in the curtains at the window]

Your servants ran away. The waters of your most excellent well embraces them, worthy father. Fear not. The little Mee Fah Kam shall be received less coldly.

[While the soldiers are trussing up HO GIT, MEE FAH KAM slips her hand along the ledge, draws in the basket, opens it and tosses the bird high in air above the cherry tree, then turns and stumbles over the cage that has fallen at her feet.]

FIRST SOLDIER

[*Catching MEE FAH KAM in his arms as she tries to get past him*]

Ah, my liddle birdling, my preddy liddle dove. Flutter into my arms, impatient one, my liddle lamp of heaven. [*He bends her head back and brutally kisses her mouth and hair.*] I bathe myself in your fragrance, lotus blossom. You lo-af me? Ye-as? No-oo? You do NOT loaf? Then run away. I let you go. See, I loose your arms. I bid you go. [*He steps back quickly as if to leave her, pushing her aside with seeming gentleness, but as she stumbles on her bound feet in an effort to regain her balance, he pretends to misunderstand.*] My passion flower will not leave me? You do loaf, maybe, ye-as?

[*The soldier tosses MEE FAH KAM over his shoulder and starts to the inner room, but stops as the piercing strains of Yankee Doodle played on strident fife and bellowing drums, float in through the window. Above the flippant melody, the steady beat of marching feet rumbles like distant thunder.*]

MEE FAH KAM

[*Tremulous with hope*]

My American man!

FIRST SOLDIER

[*Disgustedly*]

Damned joy-killers!

SECOND SOLDIER

Yankee pigs!

HO GIT

[*Wildly striking the gong with his bound fists, his face aglow with mad abandon*]

Amellica! Am-m-el-lica! AM-E-LLL-LI-CA!

SECOND SOLDIER

[*Kicking the gong across the room and striking HO GIT's mouth to stop his inhuman bellowing*]

Save your breath to cool your suey, old chink. No one will hear.

FIRST SOLDIER

[*Again boastfully, now that the army has turned into another street*]

We've raped and swilled this street along. There's none can stop us. We command. The maids all take to their heels, but we let them go knowing that your daughter, the lady Honorable Mee Fah Kam, will not run. [*Mocking before HO GIT with MEE FAH KAM's stiff little body held across his outstretched arms, he bows low.*] Most august crippler of pretty pigeons, for this we give you thanks.

[*He turns back toward the inner room with MEE FAH KAM struggling in his arms. HO GIT is physically motionless, but his eyes dart hither and thither about the room. His breath is sharp and quick; hard animal-like squeaks, high and shrill, cut the air as he exhales. The soldier turns at the door, tosses his hand gloatingly.*]

AMERICAN OFFICER

[Climbing in through the window and the cherry-tree]
HALT!

[The FIRST SOLDIER drops MEE FAH KAM, wheels about, salutes and stands at attention. SECOND SOLDIER slides through the door before the officer is well inside the room. For one fleeting moment the muscles of Ho GIT's face struggle to reveal the grateful inner man. The officer stands beside MEE FAH KAM, a tender pity suffusing his wind-tanned face. He ignores the soldier's salute and turns and speaks, seemingly for Ho GIT alone.]

It is an old practice, this binding of your daughter's feet, and one some men might thank you for, but it is not the American custom to prey upon captive birds. We take to the open road when the ducks go over, matching our aim against their flight. It is great sport, Ho Git, and one you with your loaded dice can hardly know. We are merciless, sometimes, and cunning in driving our game to cover, but we are sportsmen. We do not clip their wings. If we are clever enough, and strong of limb and steady, we stand to win. Ho Git, you lose. This is a nation of pretty speeches and prettier maids who flutter modestly, and a pack of impotent doddering fools. You bind your women's feet as a sign of nobility, but what degradation do you bring to them? Outside your wall the wells are filled with women and children. It's the same in every street. You have eyes, you have seen. You know why they ran. Does it mean nothing to

you that maids with bandaged feet are never found among them? What becomes of the high caste women, your daughters who cannot run? Billeted across the street, I protect your household. I heard when Mee Fah Kam's messenger tapped at my window, but no one was listening in the next street where Fah Gum was weeping, and no help came. The great Lung's pretty blossom will sing no more.

HO GIT

[Looking straight before him with unseeing eyes, his face a block of wood but for the occasional quiver of an eye-lid]

What is written is written.

[MEE FAH KAM bends over and listens eagerly. SOLDIER still stands at attention.]

AMERICAN OFFICER

[Sighing and seating himself near MEE FAH KAM]

What is written can be revised. In America, we do things differently. With us the cage door is always open. Our birds flit in and out at will. They spread their wings and fly away singing and come home again, because they are free. In my country the women stand shoulder to shoulder with their brothers, equal in body and in mind. They enter the race with no fetters of our making. They can make their freedom as great as our own.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Looking down at her bandaged feet and sighing wistfully*]

Tell us—tell us more of this Heaven.

AMERICAN OFFICER

[*Picking up her omerti and hanging its ribbon over MEE FAH KAM's arm*]

Take your funny fiddle and sing of the rice fields.
That song you sing when the moon shines in.

MEE FAH KAM

[*Strumming lightly for a moment without singing, and then frowning*]

I, I cannot sing.

AMERICAN OFFICER

[*Prompting her*]

"And blue the rice-pool water lay
Holding the sky."

That's the way it goes. I've often watched you dreaming above your flowers like a little saint from heaven. What were you thinking? What is it that you think now?

MEE FAH KAM

[*Spreading her arms before her and touching her head to the floor*]

Mee Fah Kam cannot sing when the honorable father is bound.

AMERICAN OFFICER

Then the "honorable father" shall be freed. Unbind Mr. Ho, Kamarad, and report to your officer. Hurry, we must have the song. Sing on, sing on. Light up the lamp of heaven. "Alas my sorrow! Why—" Sing on, sing.

MEE FAH KAM

[Modestly strumming a few bars and beginning to sing, and then leaning over toward him breathlessly]

And then—will—you tell me—about—the world—over there?

AMERICAN OFFICER

[Mopping his brow in the American fashion]

Ye gods, I'd take you to it. *[He starts toward her, but drops back to his seat in the window.]* A pale will o' the wisp floating above the world! Float on.

MEE FAH KAM

[Singing]

"Blue was the sky,
Blue was the sky,
And blue the rice-pool water lay
Holding the sky;
Blue was the robe she wore that day.
Alas, my sorrow! Why
Must life bear all away,
Away, away,
Ah, my beloved, why?"

[*The FIRST SOLDIER has now unbound HO GIT. He salutes and passes out quickly. HO GIT crosses to the family shrine and pours fresh rice in the bowls and lights new incense in thanksgiving to his ancestors.*]

HO GIT

[*Prostrating himself with great ceremony*]

Most worthy ancestors, the great Ho Git is calling.
[*MEE FAH KAM looks at her father and starts to kneel with him, but suddenly her face lights with understanding. She smiles whimsically at the OFFICER, balances totteringly on her tiny feet, then holds her hands out to him.*]

MEE FAH KAM

Upon you I bestow my kindly recognition, and most augustly thank for my celestial head.

[*Swaying lightly as a reed upon the arm that offers her support, she turns resolutely from her father and the family shrine, and with the eagerness of a child waiting for the promised story of the Fairy Prince, points above the OFFICER'S head and the cherry blooms to the purple distance.*]

Now, now tell me about the world over there where the last word is not written, and the women's prayers are graciously permitted to ascend to heaven on the santol and clove-oil incense that carries their lord's.
[*With eyes half closed, chin lifted and nostrils dilating*

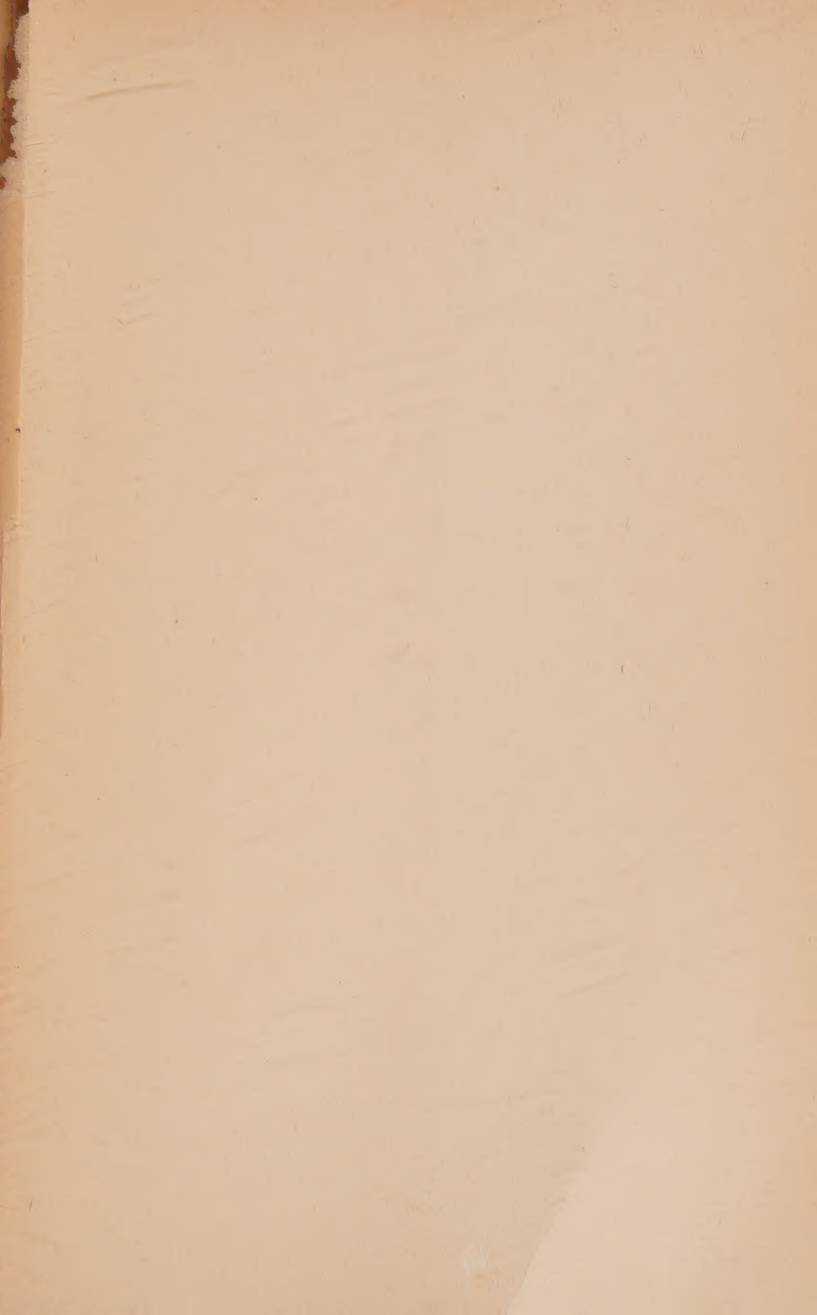
as she breathes deeply.] I SEE it in my dreams, this AMERICA, where the glow in the heart like the Lamp of Heaven leads on and on.

HO GIT

[Before the shrine]

Honorable mother! Most worthy father! Venerable grandfather! You hear a cooing dove fluttering in the sunbeams? It is my daughter, Mee Fah Kam. *[Opening the inner doors of the shrine and blowing the cloud of smoke into the inmost recesses with the fan that he draws from the neck of his kimona]* The INVINCIBLE one whose voice startles the night-winds and frightens the thunder clouds back to the mountains,—*[bows with elaborate ceremony]* is—YOUR SON, HO GIT.

THE END



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